

WHAT ARE THE



In the days of old-fashioned colonialism, the metropolitan powers sent their officials to live in Africa and directly run the colonies. Today they do so indirectly through NGOs. This month, we take an indepth look at the activities of the thousands of foreign NGOs and their local spinoffs who now hold the continent in thrall, and ask whether they are Africa's new colonisers. This analysis is by **Rotimi Sankore**.

THE NGOs DOING?



At the beginning of last month, the Nigerian and international media were full of news that Nigeria had been granted debt relief to the tune of \$31bn by the Paris Club of “rich Western nations”. Nigerian government officials were ecstatic. Towards the end of the news reports, it was mentioned matter-of-factly that a millennium development committee had been set up which will be chaired by Nigeria’s president, Olusegun Obasanjo, “to monitor what happens to the debt relief”. The committee would include representatives of *Oxfam* and *ActionAid*, two international development charities or NGOs. The committee, inaugurated on the eve of the G8 Summit in Gleneagles, is also monitoring the UN Millennium

Development Goals. Anyone remotely familiar with the nature of executive presidencies, and in particular Obasanjo’s presidency, will know that monitoring by the president means nothing will happen to the money without his and the committee’s approval. In effect, two international development charities will be helping “monitor” and implement budgetary policy to the tune of \$31bn in Africa’s most populous country of an estimated 130 million people – without an electoral or democratic mandate to do so.

This step-up from advocacy and campaigning to execution of policy, even if in an “advisory” capacity, is unprecedented, and the question has to be asked – does this herald a new phase of intervention in which unelected international NGOs will begin

to participate in the running of African countries? If the Nigerian government, a regional "power" with considerable economic and political clout, has accepted this, will it set a precedent for other African countries, especially the smaller ones with less clout? And if a pattern is established, will this not amount to a new type of "colonialism", even if by apparently friendly forces?

That a development of such monumental significance has occurred without barely an eyebrow being raised by Africa's mainstream politicians is a shocking reflection of the extent to which democracy, sovereignty and political independence have now become meaningless concepts to African leaders and the array of unelected international development experts who believe they have the solutions to Africa's problems and can implement them in such an undemocratic manner.

To put it another way, it is impossible by any stretch of the imagination, to visualise any circumstances in which foreign NGOs would impose themselves, or be co-opted by executive fiat into the running of a Western country without it becoming a national crisis. Within the blink of an eye, there would be calls for a vote of no confidence and for the government to quit if it did not think it could govern without surrendering its democratic mandate to unelected foreign NGOs – unless of course those countries were to suffer colonisation and its fallouts.

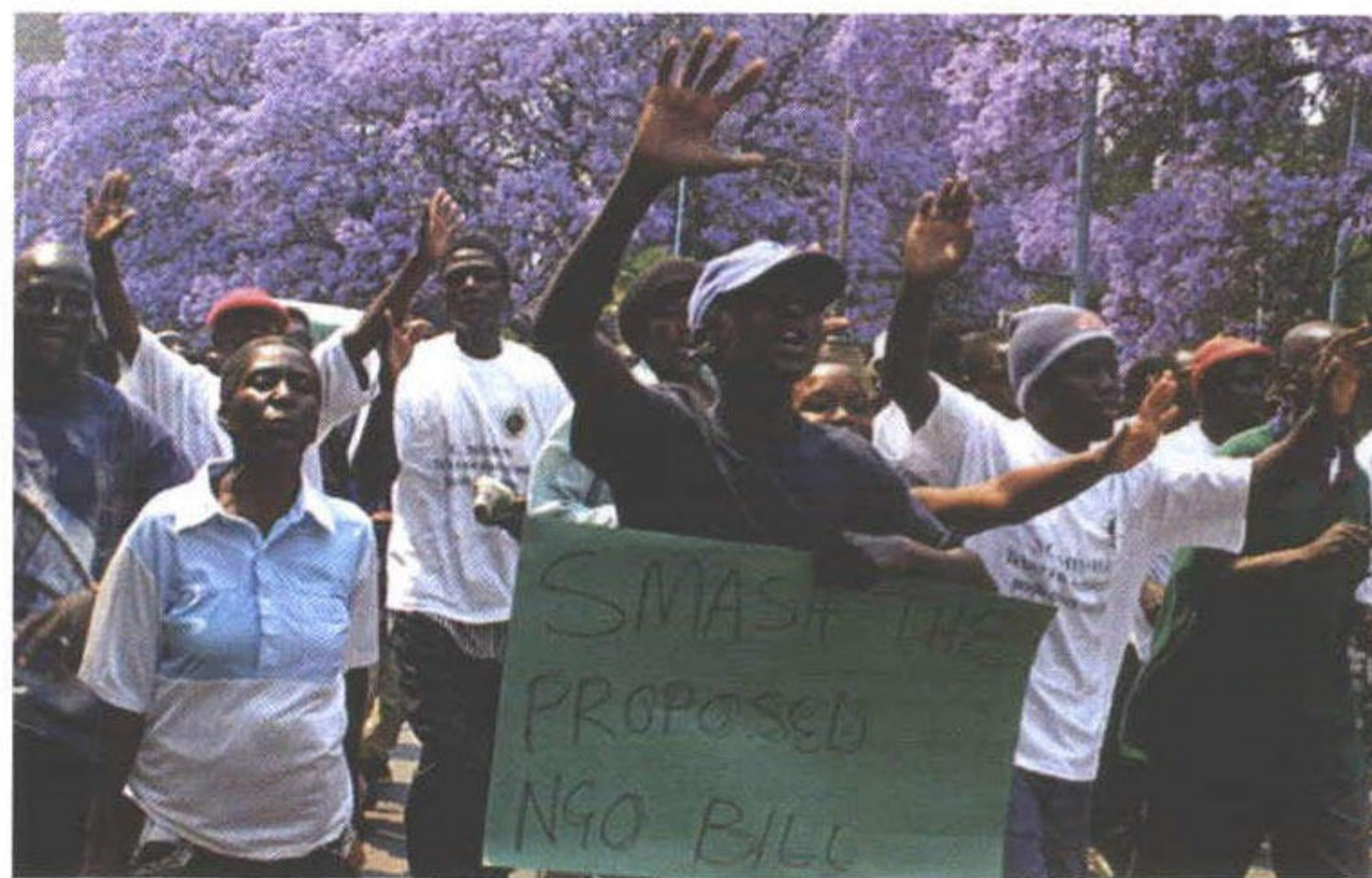
The issue here is not merely one of African nationalism and pride as it may be simplistically interpreted. Rather it touches on the very essence of what it means for a continent to be democratically governed by its own people and to completely free itself from the shackles of colonialism, which, we must not forget, exists for the clear and undisputable reason of maximum exploitation by whatever means necessary – overt or covert, subtle or crude.

Is it therefore more acceptable that it is NGOs that now sit on presidential budgetary committees rather than representatives of the World Bank, IMF, foreign governments or multinational companies? This is not to suggest that their stated and actual objectives are the same. They are not, in the same way that the early colonial governments, explorers, multinationals and missionaries did not have the same explicit objectives in Africa. The only subtle goal they had in common, even if subliminally, was to bring "civilisation" to the natives and save them from themselves. Regardless of their good intentions, if NGOs unwittingly provide cover for false solutions, does that not in some way make them part of the problem? Only the naïve will argue that the work of missionaries did not help pave the way for the near total triumph of the colonial project.

However, some people have argued that if Africa and Africans are incapable of running their own countries effectively and sustaining levels of economic, technological and industrial development necessary to raise standards of living and eliminate poverty – or at least reduce poverty to levels accepted as decent in the industrialised countries – then Africans must be prepared to accept outside intervention.

But this line of thinking overlooks completely the real reasons why many African countries appear to be helpless in the face of obstacles that must be overcome to achieve industrialisation and stable democracies. By failing to point out or ignoring the real reasons, many international NGOs perpetuate the self-serving myth that without their endless support, Africa will sink into unimaginable depths of misery.

To begin with, Africa is not poor. The colonial powers and the multinationals they introduced and protect did not come to Africa to exploit poverty. They came to exploit Africa's riches – both human and natural resources. If much of Africa has governance problems today and



The attractions of foreign funding have led to some African NGOs accepting, wittingly and unwittingly, to be used by foreign powers against their home governments, which, in turn, has led to new laws restricting their activities, as in Zimbabwe

is ravaged by poverty, it is largely because foreign intervention spanning more than five centuries has undermined and institutionalised the factors that hamper Africa's development. Of course this is not the only reason, but it is the main reason. To dismiss it as mere dwelling on the past is on par with holocaust denial.

A summary of these interventions and their consequences are as follows: 400 years of unchecked banditry and slavery backed by major European powers that directly or indirectly killed and took away over 100 million Africans in their prime, and in the process disrupted all social and political development for four centuries. Their slave labour created fabulous wealth and the basis for modern industrial growth in the Americas and Europe.

Then came colonial repression which in some places lasted over 100 years, and led to the deaths of tens of thousands of actual and potential African leaders. Alongside this has been the shaping and entrenchment of economic development frameworks designed to benefit multinational exploitation of resources, and imposition of government bureaucracies and repressive legislation designed to perpetuate such frameworks.

There was also the deliberate seeding into African countries of Trojan horses by way of armed forces and police originally constructed to repress the "natives" and which subsequently played the role of overthrowing or eliminating post independence leaders that appeared to be a threat to Western economic and political interests, such as Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana and Patrice Lumumba in DR Congo.

Even where national armies were not a direct instrument of Western policy to bring down progressive African leaders, the fact that brutal characters such as Idi Amin in Uganda had been cultivated and brought to power by the British and their allies, meant that the armies would not suddenly accept the authority of civilian leaders who just a few years before the army had been repressing on behalf of colonial authorities.

Coup after coup followed and the intelligentsia from all sectors of society were repressed, murdered or driven into exile in their tens of thousands. Under the guise of fighting communism, dictators such as Mobutu in Zaire/DR Congo were supported over decades by Western governments and economic interests until their countries degenerated and disintegrated into failed states and unending cycles of conflict.

It is vital to underline that most of Africa has been “independent” for only between 10 and 46 years and for most of that period many countries were ruled by dictators supported by Cold War enemies. In return for support from the West, undemocratic and not so undemocratic governments only needed to agree to open up their economies for even more exploitation, devalue currencies to make mineral resources cheaper, and spend more on servicing dubious debts than they actually spent on education, healthcare, housing, agriculture, water, electricity and investment in science and technology.

Till this day, Sierra Leone, for instance, despite just emerging from conflict, still spends more on servicing debt than it does on healthcare and education, while its diamonds are exploited by a cartel of interests. All opposition to such exploitation is brutally repressed across much of Africa, and those that survive continue to flee abroad.

Not surprisingly, “more African scientists and engineers now work in the US than in the whole of Africa” and “Nigeria alone has 33,000 doctors in the US” while the country suffers a healthcare crisis (*New Scientist*, 2 July 2005).

According to Kassahun Chicole, the US-based Eritrean book publisher, it would benefit Africa greatly if the continent took time and reviewed the demographics of the African and African-American professional class in the US. “African immigrants,” Chicole told *New African* in July, “are the highest educated class in the US in the range of all immigrants here. It is estimated that there are over 640,000 African professionals in the US. Over 360,000 of them hold PhDs; 120,000 of them (from Nigeria, Ghana, Egypt, Sudan, and Uganda) are medical doctors. The rest are professionals in various fields – from the head of research for the US space agency, Nasa, to the highest paid material science professors (Nano science, a Nigerian at Princeton and an Egyptian at UCLA are the two highest paid scientists in the field). Furthermore, the total disposable income of the African and African-American community (grouped together) is over \$520bn annually.”

No doubt these doctors will recall the jailing of the entire leadership of the Nigerian Medical Association in the early 1980s for daring to protest for improved healthcare facilities and balk at returning home when they see the same people still in power but without their uniforms.

To put it bluntly, a key factor undermining Africa’s development has been the net loss of lives and vital human resources over the last 500 years, not to mention the millions that die yearly of preventable diseases and causes because governments have been instructed by Western economic interests that it is more important to service dubious debts than to invest in their own countries. What Africa needs today are ironclad guarantees of a complete policy of non-intervention by foreign political and economic interests. When Western governments now call for more democracy before more aid is given or debt forgiveness granted, they act straight faced as if they do not know who is responsible for the coming to power of the Mobutus and Idi Amins, and the looting and destruction of their countries.

When international NGOs perpetuate these convenient myths by insinuating that more aid, fair trade and debt forgiveness is needed and volunteer to “monitor” policy implementation and good governance indicators, they become part of the long-term problem even while

providing short-term solutions that save lives. And because they have bought into the myths, they create stereotypical images of Africa – the continent of the poverty stricken, both in terms of resources and ideas. Year upon year, they keep on producing even more pornographic images of poverty in Africa in order to raise money to save few lives today and loose even more tomorrow.

When cynics point at Asia as a model for development, they forget that the relatively higher development in parts of Asia exists because no industrial-scale slavery and destruction of society was imposed there for four centuries. Unlike in Africa, the foundations of most Asian civilisations and cultures remained largely intact. Colonialism only suspended the natural trajectory of development in Asia that then continued once it was ended.

On the other hand, the transatlantic slave trade followed by the scramble for and partition of Africa by European powers moved Africa’s development firmly into reverse. The creation of artificial borders and the skilful manipulation of competing ethnic nationalities into minority/majority positions within different colonial constructs, also created conflict situations within Africa.

Were it not for the immortality of the pyramids in Egypt and Sudan, and the scattered records of past African civilisations, the entire continent might have well been declared a historical wasteland. Unfortunately, international NGOs are often naïve about or ignore these historical realities, preferring to call for fair trade, more aid and debt relief as if these in themselves are permanent solutions.

If slavery had robbed Europe of 100 million of its citizens in their prime over a 400-year period, then had tens of thousands of intelligentsia, actual and potential leaders murdered, repressed or driven into exile by colonial powers and foreign-backed dictators over an additional 100-year period while simultaneously being drained of economic resources, it would not be any better than Africa is today. If anyone thinks Africans were stupid or weak and deserved what they got, would the same argument apply to the six million Jews murdered by forced labour and in gas chambers by the Nazis over a five-year period? If the holocaust is acknowledged as a crime against humanity,

why not slavery? Why not colonialism?

Debt relief or advice on improved management of such relief by NGOs will not solve Africa’s problems. Most of the world’s leading economists and international development experts have long acknowledged that for every dollar in aid to Africa, Western economic interests take out a minimum of two dollars. This is not to mention the loot that props up many Western banks. Nigeria’s Anti-Corruption Commission estimated in June this year that about \$521bn had been stolen from the country and stashed in Western banks between 1960 and 1999. This is roughly the same as the amount of “aid” given to the entire continent over the same period.

Whatever their good deeds and intentions, by asking or by accepting to be on President Obasanjo’s millennium development committee, *Oxfam* and *ActionAid* have tacitly implied that they believe they know better than the Nigerian electorate what should be done with the debt relief. Beyond this, they have also endorsed a framework that wrongly suggests that debt relief and proper management of such relief is the solution to Africa’s problems. ■ **NA**

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